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## **Hong Kong**

### **Market Development Reports**

# **Sale of Live Chickens Resumes in Hong Kong 2001**

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#### **Report Highlights:**

Retail sales of live chickens resumed in Hong Kong on June 16, 2001, after a one month suspension and the culling of over one million mature birds at markets and local farms in the wake of the second bird flu crisis in 3 years. Imports of ducks and geese resumed on June 10 and June 12, respectively. The Hong Kong Government has stepped up its surveillance program to control future outbreaks of bird flu, but it acknowledges that there is no guarantee against the return of the dreadful virus.

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To facilitate re-opening of the market, a total of 128,000 chickens were imported from China on June 15. The import quantity was similar to levels handled before the crisis. Anticipating that market demand for chickens would be strong, industry people raised wholesale and retail prices about 20% to 30%. About 15,000 live chickens went unsold in the wholesale market on the first day because demand was weaker than expected. Imports were then slashed by 30% on the following day and prices returned to the normal range of HK\$18 to HK\$24 per catty (1 catty = 670 grams; US\$ 1 = HK\$7.78). Retail business gradually improved as well, probably due to the lower prices and a recovery of confidence in buying chickens.

While the source of the bird flu outbreak remains to be identified officially, the government has introduced several new measures to strengthen its surveillance program:

1. Stricter handling and cleaning conditions and guidelines are to be imposed on retailers of poultry, including a monthly rest day on the 25<sup>th</sup> of each month to permit cleaning and disinfecting; a specific limit on the number of chickens that can be kept in one cage; mandatory reporting of chicken deaths when they reach an unusual level; and mandatory covers over the bottom trays of poultry cages being transported. Any violation of the requirements will automatically lead to the cancellation of retail licences to sell meat or termination of market stall leases. According to a member of the Hong Kong Government's flu committee, the one-day-a-month closure of wet markets for cleaning is the most important of the new anti-flu measures because it will prevent the build-up of the virus and break the cycle of virus mutation. The HKG insisted on this new precautionary measure despite strong opposition from the industry.
2. Wholesale markets will continue their usual practice of having three rest days a month, on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> days. The rest day is to facilitate thorough cleansing and disinfection work and to break the cycle for the breeding of avian flu viruses. Cleaning of chicken cages will be assigned to contractors under the supervision of the Agriculture, Fisheries, and Conservation Department (AFCD), but wholesalers will need to pay HK\$1.90 for each cage cleaned. In the past, cleaning of cages was arranged by wholesalers without the involvement of AFCD.
3. On the inspection front, the Government increased the number of tests to be performed on imported poultry. Staff of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department are now to take 14 blood samples (13 samples were required prior to the second crisis) from each truckload for testing for H5 antibodies, with results to be available within a few hours. Trucks will then go directly to the wholesale market, however, chickens will not be released for sale until the results of blood tests show they are H5 negative. Some additional blood samples from chickens in the wholesale market will be collected for testing on a routine basis. These measures were taken only

at random before the second flu crisis. As an additional surveillance measure, the Agriculture, Fisheries, and Conservation Department will test samples collected from dead chickens in the wholesale and retail markets for influenza viruses.

4. Efforts will also be made to reduce commingling of poultry species to discourage the mutation of deadly new viruses. The Hong Kong Government is taking immediate action to amend legislation to prohibit the sale of live quails and live chickens in the same location. The reason is that quails harbor the H6 and H9 viruses which mutated to form the 1997 bird flu strain. This new measure probably spells the end for sales of live quail in Hong Kong because it is not economically feasible to sell quail by itself. The Government continues to study the option to restrict or ban the sale of three other birds - pheasants, partridges and guinea fowl - pending the conclusions of a scientific study now underway. Since the first bird flu crisis in 1997, ducks and geese have been centrally slaughtered in the Western wholesale market, where no chicken business is conducted. To reinforce the thorough segregation of ducks and geese from chickens throughout the entire distribution process, cages and trucks used for holding and transporting chickens will not be used for ducks and geese.

By adopting these stronger new precautionary measures taken, the Hong Kong Government believes it now has a very stringent monitoring system. Nonetheless, HKG officials admit that there is no guarantee that the bird flu will never hit Hong Kong again and they are asking for the cooperation of the poultry industry to maintain the new hygiene standards. This will be crucial to the success of the new monitoring system.

Following suggestions from the Hong Kong medical and scientific community, the Hong Kong government has been considering to extend its central slaughtering policy to chickens. The belief is that central slaughtering is an effective means to avoid another outbreak of bird flu. However, opposition from the poultry industry is huge. The Government has hesitated to impose central slaughtering policy for chickens because of a number of factors -- the eating habits of the local community, the effect on jobs for unskilled laborers at the wholesale and retail levels, and the effects on farms. This is a difficult political decision. It is likely that the Hong Kong Government will start an internal study or even conduct a community wide consultation on this subject in the very near future.

The recent bird flu crisis certainly affected consumption patterns for poultry meat in Hong Kong in the short term, but longer term trends are also in effect. The consumption of chilled and frozen chickens has been increasing over the years. Actually Hong Kong people have become more receptive to chilled and frozen meat products in recent years. The impact of the latest bird flu crisis on the consumption of chilled and frozen chickens will be discussed in more detail in the upcoming annual poultry report.